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TITLE: HIV Counseling and Testing -A New Approach

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ISSUE: HIV counseling and testing helps clients use the knowledge of their HIV status to make decisions towards taking better care of their lives. When linked with prevention and medical services, testing serves as a gateway for individuals to access care without delay, with focus on staying negative if negative, or getting medical if positive. However, this opportunity is too often overlooked.

SETTING : The David Geffen Center for HIV Prevention and Health Education at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the largest and oldest AIDS Service organization in the country, offers HIV counseling and testing services in the New York City (NYC) metropolitan area. NYC remains the epicenter of the U.S. HIV/AIDS epidemic.

PROJECT: The Geffen Center model of HIV testing and counseling offers a unique approach. It uses a mental health model which focuses on psychological factors influencing a client's risk behavior. It is housed in an AIDS service organization, allowing seamless referrals to prevention services and medical care. Additionally, outreach efforts through prevention programs at GMHC target communities at risk.. Continuity of care is provided. The clients work with the same counselor throughout the testing process. Clients are seen for a 45 minute pretest counseling session, and return one week later for their results. Clients who test HIV positive, receive a second post-test counseling session, to provide additional support and to ensure referral to medical care.

RESULT: Of the approximately 1600 clients who have been tested since the Geffen Center opened in June 1997, only 7 clients have failed to return for their results – an unprecedented return rate of 99.6%. Of the 66 clients who have tested HIV positive, 62 have been seen before they finished services at the Geffen Center.

LESSONS LEARNED: The Geffen Center model offers a unique approach to HIV counseling and testing. Its effectiveness is demonstrated by the high rate of return for results, implying engagement of the clients in the testing process, an important first step towards effecting behavior changes. For the clients who test positive, a significant focus is on linking them with medical care before they leave the program. This model, linking testing with prevention efforts and HIV medical care, can be easily reproduced.

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